TIME TO MEET THE BIRD

Everyone seems to enjoy gathering and sharing over a plate of appetizers, and yes, even social media has an appetizer course to offer. Enter stage right, microblogging. This term designates a tool that acts as a mini-feed, or an appetizer of sorts, that functions by pulling short messages from multiple sources and delivering them to you. A time-saving smorgasbord of appetizers. But don't forget, this feast is potluck. Your friends will let you stop by empty-handed for awhile, but eventually you will want to join in and share your own creations. Come on, this is going to be fun (and maybe just a little addictive).

So there's the quest, "Gorge Yourself on Appetizers" (who is making up these names anyway?). We begin by meeting a little bird and emulating his ability to captivate with only a short, tiny, sound called a "twitter." You can go to the Twitter site by either clicking the link below or typing it into your browser's address window: http://www.twitter.com.

GORGE YOURSELF ON APPETIZERS

Say goodbye to "always being the last one to know." Not only is microblogging informative and efficient, it is fast. Follow the right people, and you will know everything going on in the world within minutes. Let's go:

- Visit the Twitter Website and register for an account.
- Follow 10 people (Tweeple) for a week
- Post your own "Tweets" for a week
- Respond to any messages directed at you

The Twitter site will offer a page that brightly tells you to "Sign up now." What luck because you do want to get started and sign up now. Before you make that final leap, you might want to watch a quick video, *Twitter in Plain English*. Watching this video is a good idea. Not only is it amusing, the video helps to explain the new paradigm of microblogging.

If you go ahead and click the strangely colored green button that encourages you to sign up now, you will be taken to a sign-up screen. Using your chosen username, type it in the box and hope that no one else has already signed up using this name. If you are the

first, you will get a happy, "ok" message. Great! (If not, you will have to keep trying different

variations or other names until one gives you

the happy, and much anticipated "ok" message.) Make sure you type in the captcha words that are difficult to read, but even harder for a robot who might be trying to create a Twitter account (and yes, this is a clear case of robot discrimination). From there, you will be asked to search your e-mail
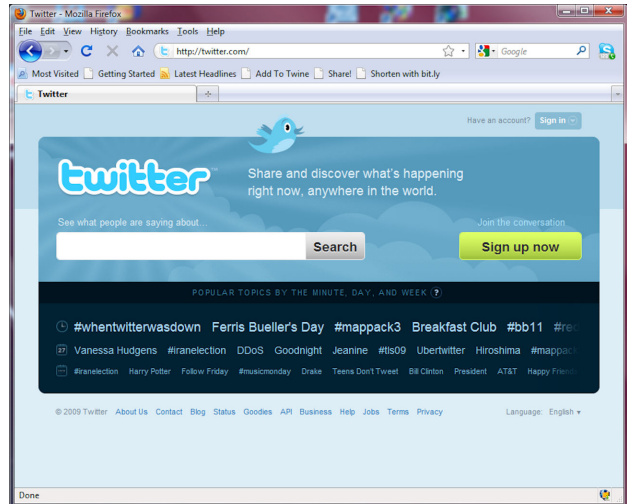
contacts to see if they already have a Twitter account. Please skip past this, unless it is something that you are just dying to do and will keep you up at night should you not accept this option. (If you cannot find the "Skip" option, look near the middle of your screen; Twitter has strategically placed the "Skip this step" link here in very small letters while the search Web Email option is centered and much larger.) Next Twitter will offer you the incredible chance to automatically follow people they have

hand-picked. If you want to accept their suggestions, then do nothing more than click the big, green "Finish" button on the screen. However, if you don't like having your friends chosen for you, just uncheck the box near the top of the list where it says "Select All." This will take the check marks out of all the people listed, allowing you to begin with a clean slate. Then you can click the big, green "Finish" button. Ok, you are done and you should now find yourself at your Twitter home.
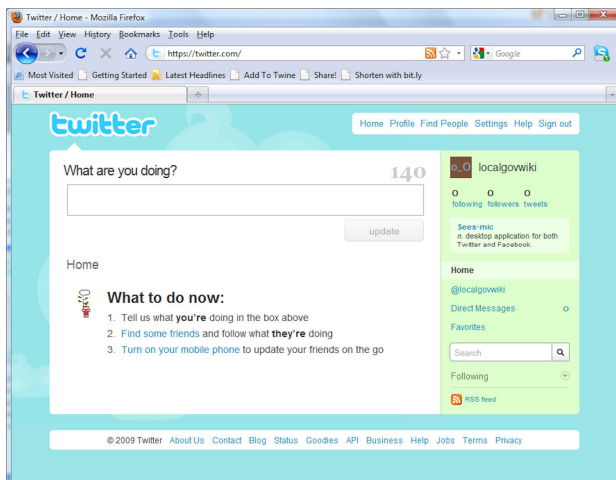
Before we go any further, let's get a little more acquainted with the Twitter home page layout. First, you will notice Twitter asking you, "What are you doing?" followed by an open box with the number "140" just above the box. Below this box, Twitter is offering you a friendly suggestion: "What to do now." Most likely because that is the very thing you are wondering yourself. So if gently asking you didn't work, they now tell you to let them know what you are doing in the box. Below that is the suggestion to find some friends, and they mean on the Twitter site—let's be clear here, they do not mean find someone on the street and start following them. That will surely lead to trouble. Next they tell you to turn on your mobile phone, not the one plugged into the wall, to tell your "friends" what you are doing.

That is a lot to do for someone who is just starting. What do they want from us? Well, we will at least tell them what we are doing by typing into the box since they seem pretty keen on getting us to at least do that. So go up to the box, and type one of the messages below depending on your personality. Remember these posts stay associated with your account so use one with which you are comfortable, or feel free to make up one of your own. (A special thanks to Adriel Hampton, an awesome social media guru from San Francisco, for calling my attention to the first quote in the list):

> "There go my people. I must find out where they are going so I can lead them." - French politician Alexandre Ledru-Rollin

> New to Twitter. Looking forward to following others in engineering, government, or public works.

> Just started using Twitter because this crazy online guide told me to. #YSMJBH09

As you type these words into the box, you will notice the number that started out at 140 decreasing to reflect the number of characters you have left. This is a very important concept behind microblogging—you must get your message across in only 140 characters. Don't you wish we had this rule in other aspects of our lives?

The last message ended with some funny letters that really didn't make sense so it doesn't surprise me if few people chose to use that message, besides the fact, it is the more "off-the-wall" comment. I included it to demonstrate one way of tagging your messages and finding those of others. As you increase your use of Twitter, there will come the day you say to yourself, "Gee, I wonder what is going on over at that cool conference my boss wouldn't let me attend?" Well, if those attending the conference include this "hashtag" in all their messages or "Tweets" that relate to the conference, then all you have to do is search for that hashtag. Perhaps there will come a day when conference organizers publish the "official" hashtag to be used in microblog messages that reference a particular event, but for now, people who are on Twitter are making this decision amongst themselves.

Back to the other parts of the home site: in the right sidebar of the site, you will see your username displayed with a little square icon. Oh my gosh! You look like a silly brown square with googly eyes. We must work on that image. So before exploring any further, let's go upload that profile photo you have sitting in your computer waiting for just this moment. To edit your profile, you might think you should click "Profile" up at the very top of the Twitter screen, but oh no, you should be clicking "Settings" instead. Go there and you will see a page showing your account information. Twitter offers some helpful tips over in the sidebar. But you don't need to read these now, you've got this guidebook! You can change your Name designation to indicate your real name, not your username, but only if you want others to know who you really are. Your username will remain the same.

The other entries allow you to change your e-mail, time zone, and add a URL for a Web site or blog, but only if you want that site associated with you. There is also room for a bio but this is limited to 160 characters—refer to the profile information you prepared in the earlier chapter. Now you can put in your location and the language with which you will want to read Twitter. The last choice on this page is a box with the words "Protect my updates." Checking this ensures your posts will be private so that no one else can read what you write. This might seem somewhat counterproductive so only check this if you want to have to first invite people before they can read your posts. Otherwise, remember that everything you post is out there for the world to see. (Note that this is also where you would delete your account. But Twitter is one of those things that take time to develop a taste for. So I would advise holding off doing any deleting until you have used Twitter for at least a week or so.) Click the save

button at the bottom before we go any further.

Ok, on to that picture. You could just click the tab on this page that says "Picture," but like most Websites, you can get there faster by just clicking an image so click the googly-eyed brown square at the top next to your name. This brings you to a screen that looks something like the image on this page. Click the "Browse" button and a screen will pop up that allows you to browse (hence the "Browse" designation on the button) to where you have your ready-to-go profile photo stored. Navigate to that location, and click the file so that it places the file location in the box. As you can see Twitter tells you the file must be below 700k and be in either JPG, GIF, or PNG format, but if you prepared the photo as described earlier, you should be ok. If successful, Twitter will tell you it is a nice picture and return you to this screen.

Although there are more tabs up there, we will only review the Design tab. Click this and you will be given a choice of designs that can be used as your Twitter background on your page. There are theme choices along with the opportunity for you to upload your own background image. You can even pick the colors used for exciting items such as the text, links, and the sidebar. What more could you want from a microblogging site? When done, click the "save changes" button at the bottom.

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Twitter—the only place where it is ok to follow others without being labeled a "creep" or a "sheep"

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Now, go back to your home by clicking "Home" at the top. At this point we need to work on our next step which is to find 10 people to follow. In the world of Twitter, following simply means that you have chosen to collect a particular person's Tweets and have them fed to your Twitter home page. For now, I am going to suggest some people for you to follow based on having watched them post over the last several months. While there are many great and interesting folks to follow, it is best to only start out with a few while you get the hang of it. By watching their posts over the week, you will have a good idea about how people are using Twitter.

Now, to choose your ten, you can either take my suggestions below or you can visit the GovTwit Directory at http://govtwit.com/ and pick your own.

Here is a list of a mixture of folks who are involved in all levels of government, construction, engineering, and public works.

Adriel Hampton	http://twitter.com/adrielhampton
City of Naperville	http://twitter.com/NapervilleIL
FEMA In Focus	http://twitter.com/femainfocus
Mark Drapeau	http://twitter.com/cheeky_geeky
Staci Ford	http://twitter.com/ConstructionPM
EPA	http://twitter.com/greenversations
Patti Flesher	http://twitter.com/ConcreteThinker
10 Downing Street	http://twitter.com/DowningStreet
NPR News	http://twitter.com/nprnews
Pam Broviak	http://twitter.com/pbroviak

Twitter Messages

By first following a few Twitter veterans you get a good feel for what types of messages are usually posted.

Here are some tips to consider when posting:

- Posts that would elicit a typical "TMI or too much information" are probably best kept to oneself.
- Check your company's policy about posting company-related information so you don't get yourself into trouble at work.
- Remember, if your posts are public, they are there for anyone to see, even your mother or your boss.

Many of the people listed above will follow you back once you are following them. As for me, if you choose to follow me, I will definitely follow you back. (Well, unless you are a only interested in teaching me how to get rich quick.) I am not as prolific of a Tweeter as some of the others, and most of my posts are related to public works and engineering.

AREN'T WE DONE YET?

I realize that you are probably excited about your new Twitter account and about waiting to see what words of wisdom will arrive on your very own Twitter home page. But before you are cut loose totally, we need to go over a couple last items. Trust me, you will want to know these last few tips. If you look through Tweets on other sites, you might notice some that look like this:

I am using one of Mark's tweets because he is so prolific of a Twitterer to the point that most would consider him a Twitter expert. This particular post is filled with a few great examples of how folks get information across in Twitter. You will notice that when Mark refers to someone who he knows is also a user of Twitter, he does so using their Twitter name and places an "@" symbol in front. Here is another example where Mark is directing one of his posts to one specific follower with the username MichaelHardy. Again, Mark places the "@" symbol in front of the username:

The other noticeable items from Mark's first post are the links that he includes for his readers. Each link provides more information related to his message. This is called sharing, and it is a good thing to do. The bad thing about links is that they are often long. Mark used a couple different methods of shortening those URLs in order to save characters. You can shorten the links you want to post by going to a site like TinyURL at http://www.tinyurl.co.uk/. This site will shorten any URL, and then allow you to copy and paste the Tiny URL that is generated.

Ok, the last few things you need to know are that you can check when someone directs a public message to you by clicking the "@username" word in your sidebar on your Twitter home page. This takes you to a screen listing all of the times someone has put your username in a post with the "@" symbol. Below this are the words "Direct Messages." This is where you can send short messages back

and forth between you and a specific follower and keep the communication private. These are sometimes cleverly referred to as a DM, or Direct Message.

There, I think we are almost done. You have successfully created a microblogging account at Twitter.com, you have started with your first post, and you are now following at least 10 people. The last item at hand is for you to directly respond to someone. You can achieve this either by responding to a post you particularly like, or post a message using the tag for this book: #SMNY09, or you can send me a message using the @pbroviak designation.

Great, that's it! Done. You are now a part of the Tweeple population.

TWITTER RESOURCES

Twitter is now such a hit that people are writing many guides and resources for using the service. Here are a few you might want to look at. Some are for beginners and some for more advanced users:

- *Twitter Search: http://search.twitter.com/*

- *Twitter 101, A Special Guide http://business.twitter.com/twitter101*

- *Best 100 Twitter Tools: http://commetrics.com/?p=740*

- *Twitter's 10 Commandments:*
  http://darmano.typepad.com/logic_emotion/2008/12/twitters-10-commandments.html

- *HootSuite: http://hootsuite.com/*

- *Twitter Fan Wiki/US Government: http://twitter.pbwiki.com/USGovernment*

- *TweetDeck: http://www.tweetdeck.com*